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ABSTRACT

For five years, a collaborative team consisting of a special education teacher, a general education teacher, and a university professor conducted research studies in a rural secondary school. Although the general education teacher initially was reluctant to participate in a research project, especially one that involved students with disabilities, the collaboration was successful, resulting in five publications in refereed journals and numerous benefits for the adults and students involved. This paper describes the development of the collaborative arrangement; delineation of duties; the projects undertaken; and benefits for general education students, special education students, the rural teachers involved, and the university professor. The five studies examined the use of peer tutors to teach adolescents with moderate mental disabilities to read key words from food labels; methods of teaching leisure skills to secondary students with moderate disabilities; teaching students with disabilities to say "no" and walk away from peer pressure; use of peer tutors and a system of least prompts to teach students with moderate disabilities to write letters within a secondary composition class setting; and acquisition of nontargeted information by students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom. Thirteen guidelines are presented for developing a collaborative research project in a rural setting. (SV)

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Success with Reluctant Researchers: Real Life Experiences in a Rural School Setting

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SUCCESS WITH RELUCTANT RESEARCHERS: REAL LIFE EXPERIENCES IN A RURAL SCHOOL SETTING

For 5 years, a collaborative team consisting of a special education teacher, a general education teacher, and a university professor conducted research studies in a rural secondary school setting. Although the general education teacher initially was reluctant to participate in a research project, especially one that involved students with disabilities, the model they developed proved to be successful, resulting in five publications in refereed special education journals and numerous benefits for the adults and students who were involved.

The university professor made the initial contact with the general education teacher, asking if she would be interested in participating in research studies that involved students with low incidence disabilities in inclusive activities with students without disabilities. When the general education teacher agreed (with reservations), the university professor contacted a special education teacher whose classroom in the same building served as a site for university practica. In the beginning of this collaborative arrangement, the general education teacher, who taught English, composition, and speech, had no experience with special education or applied research. The special education teacher had completed an applied research project in her classroom to meet the thesis requirement for her graduate degree and, although she provided inclusive experiences for her students, she had never worked with the general education teacher. The university professor had developed a research agenda focusing on systematic instruction for students with moderate/severe disabilities and visited the rural school on a regular basis to supervise the field experiences of students from her program at the University of Kentucky.

To develop the subsequent research projects, the team met and delineated duties. The university professor would design the studies with input from the teachers, making sure that the skills that would be taught would be functional for the students involved. In addition, the university professor would be responsible for securing funding for any incurred costs (e.g., mileage, instructional materials), securing permission from the university and the school system, training teachers and students in research procedures (e.g., instructional methods, data collection), collecting weekly reliability data, conducting formative and summative analyses of the data, preparing and submitting the results for publication, and making requested revisions upon acceptance for publication. Initially, the general education teacher was responsible for assigning students from her classes to participate in the project as peer tutors or buddies while the special education teacher supervised or conducted instruction within the special education setting. As the line of research evolved, the special education teacher became responsible for adapting materials and scheduling students with disabilities for the project in the general education teacher's classroom. In addition, the special education teacher prepared the general education students for interactions with students with disabilities while the general education teacher assigned and collected writing assignments in her class that focused on the projects (e.g., pre- and post-project reaction papers, narrative descriptions of the projects). The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 requires that all students complete portfolios of their work. Project outcomes provided alternate

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portfolios entries for the students with disabilities (e.g., instructional data, evidence of integrated activities) and English portfolio entries for the students without disabilities (e.g., written narratives, prose, poetry).

Over a span of 5 years, the success of one research project led to another as the team members disseminated the results of their projects through publications in refereed journals and presentations at local (e.g., Kentucky Council for Exceptional Children) and national (e.g., Association for Applied Behavior Analysis) conferences. The university professor was able to secure funding for some of the projects from campus resources (e.g., Interdisciplinary Human Development Institute), but the team agreed to conduct the research projects even when this funding was not available.

All of the participants in the projects benefited. The general education students, especially those in advanced classes who had never interacted with peers with low incidence disabilities, became more accepting of those students and were able to translate their experiences to written portfolio entries. The students with disabilities increased their circle of friends and developed alternate portfolio entries that documented acquisition of functional skills as well as integrated activities with peers without disabilities. Over time, the general education teacher became more willing to work with students with a variety of disabilities, a practice she has continued beyond her involvement in the projects. The special education teacher learned more about adapting the general education curriculum for her students and became more visible in the school setting. The university professor continued a line of rural research focusing on instructional procedures for students with low incidence disabilities that has been disseminated to a wide audience.

The team found that one study seemed to lead to another as the role of the general education students evolved from peer tutors to peer buddies and the responsibility for interactions with the students with disabilities shifted from the special education teacher to the general education teacher. During some projects, the team expanded to include other school personnel (i.e., special education teacher, general education teacher) who were interested in participating. The abstracts for each of the studies conducted by the collaborative team are listed below in the order in which the studies were implemented.

Collins, Branson, and Hall (1995): Peer tutors used a constant time delay procedure to teach adolescents with moderate mental disabilities to read key words from the actual labels of cooking products. They presented definitions of the identified key words as incidental information in the feedback statements. To facilitate generalization, the student used a variety of peers and two brands per product (instant hot chocolate, muffin mix, and microwave popcorn). The special education teacher conducted generalization probes using a novel product brand during a cooking activity. The students with disabilities mastered the reading of target key words in a relatively short amount of time with minimal errors, acquired some incidental learning of cooking definitions, and were able to generalize the skill across novel materials, persons, and settings.

Collins, Hall, and Branson (1997): A collaborative effort between by a university investigator, a special education teacher, and an English teacher involved teaching four leisure skills (i.e., playing cards, selecting a television program, playing a sports videotape, and playing a computer game) to 4 secondary students with moderate disabilities. The special education teacher used a system of least prompts procedure to teach the targeted skills, and nondisabled peers from an advanced English class assessed generalization across persons on an intermittent schedule. The results indicate that the collaborative project had benefits to both groups of students that included an increase in positive attitudes of the nondisabled peers toward their peers with disabilities.

Collins, Hall, Rankin, and Branson, (1999): This project taught students with disabilities to say "no" and to walk away from peers who confronted them with peer pressure in a secondary setting. The special education teachers used a constant time delay procedure to model the correct response, and peers without disabilities acted as confederates to apply peer pressure during probe trials in natural conditions.

Collins, Branson, Hall, and Rankin (2001): The English teacher and peer tutors used a system of least prompts procedure to teach 4 secondary students with moderate disabilities to write letters within a secondary composition class setting. While students without disabilities simultaneously worked on composition assignments, they taught the students with disabilities to write letters that included the following four components: (a) heading, (b) greeting, (c) content body, and (d) closing. A multiple probe across students design evaluated the effectiveness of the procedure. The English teacher collected supplementary data regarding the attitudes of the composition class

students toward the students with disabilities who participated in their class. The results indicate that it is possible to reliably incorporate direct instruction on functional academic skills within an inclusive setting. However, support for the regular education classroom teacher is desirable. Issues regarding isolation within the academic setting and limited teacher interaction are discussed.

Collins, Hall, Branson, and Holder (2002): Two secondary students with moderate disabilities (one per classroom) attended Advanced English classes with peers without disabilities in a rural high school. In additional to conducting planned daily instruction each English teacher also systematically presented three sets of nontargeted information (two facts per set) to each student with disabilities during the course of the class using a parallel treatments design. Each set of nontargeted information included a fact related to the English class (e.g., "Begin each sentence with a capital letter") and a fact not related to the English class (e.g., "The governor of Kentucky is Paul Patton"). The special education teacher conducted daily probe sessions to document acquisition. Of the six facts presented to each student with disabilities, one student acquired two related facts and one unrelated fact, while the other student acquired two related and two unrelated facts. This investigation implies that students who are fully included can acquire nontargeted information presented by the regular classroom teacher during the course of a typical class and that teachers can facilitate learning by planning to present such information in a systematic fashion.

Working on applied collaborative research projects can be beneficial for rural teachers who may feel isolated and have less access to the development of best practices in university settings. Teachers who are willing to open their classrooms for research may find that university faculty are grateful for the opportunity to use their setting for applied projects. In addition, teachers who participate in research build self-confidence in their ability to problem-solve and make decisions based on data. They also develop best practices that are beneficial to their students and to the field of education. Finally, participants may find that the personal relationships that develop during a collaborative research project often extend far beyond the school setting and create open channels for exchanging ideas once the research project has ended.

For those who are interested in developing a collaborative research project in a rural setting, the following guidelines are offered.

1. Take initiative in contacting collaborative team members. The chances are great that, if you have a willing attitude and ideas to share, others will want to work with you.

2. Brainstorm in a casual setting. Meet at a coffee shop or in a home. Get to know each other before you commit to working together.

3. Review the published literature for research ideas. Nearly all research publications end with suggestions for future research. In addition, journals geared toward practitioners (e.g., Teaching Exceptional Children) are full of good ideas that need to be verified in data-based studies.

4. Focus on teaching skills that are functional for students with disabilities. Check IEPs for skills that are targeted for instruction and then come up with novel ways of teaching them.

5. Make sure that there are clear benefits for students without disabilities. Use project involvement as an opportunity to educate students about disabilities and to facilitate friendships. Students without disabilities who help implement a project feel important when they are told they are part of a study that will have national influence when it is published. Be sure to stress confidentiality in working with students.

6. Clearly delineate team responsibilities. For example, the university member can be responsible for securing permissions, searching for funding, and finding an appropriate research design. The teachers can be responsible for scheduling, instruction, and data collection. For a checklist for conducting field-based research, see Hemmeter, Doyle, Collins, and Ault (1996).

7. Consider using a single subject research design (e.g., multiple probe design across behaviors or students) since this can be easily implemented in an applied setting and does not require statistical analysis.

8. Before beginning, write a clear overview of the procedures to be used in the investigation and list team responsibilities. Use nontechnical terms so there are no misunderstandings. Give each member a copy and send a copy to appropriate persons (e.g., university Institutional Review Board, local school board, school principal) when securing permission prior to beginning the study.

9. Prior to beginning a study, secure permission from all who will be involved. Since most students are under the age of consent, permission will need to come from their legal guardians. Use pseudonyms in place of students' names in reporting results.

10. Allow at least a full semester for any project. Expect the unforeseen (e.g., school closing, absentees, attrition).

11. Hold weekly meetings once the project is underway. Let the data guide the team in making modifications to the project.

12. Once the results are compiled, create a plan for disseminating the results. Even if the study did not go as planned, others can learn from the results. Publications and presentations can take the form of data-based analyses for researchers or practical guidelines for practitioners.

13. Let the results of one project provide the seed for the next. Don't be surprised when you hear a team member say, "Next time we should change the way we did this and try this new idea I have instead." Also, listen to students. Sometimes their feedback can be of particular value in refining future projects.

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